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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2938
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0407
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2077
RHMFIUU/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC 0406
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR
SAVING THE ARAL SEA

REFERENCES: Tashkent 1052

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) sets overall policy and coordinates the financing of regional programs in the Aral Sea Basin. Tashkent IFAS office head Usman Buranov insists the question of regional water management now is exclusively political and is inextricably linked to the question of energy. He complained that international organizations worked against each other and duplicated each others' work in Central Asia. In Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Region, the IFAS Branch Director said IFAS has five main areas of work: restore the Amu-Darya River delta system; plant trees and shrubs in the Aral Sea dry sea bed to reduce dust storms; give micro loans to help people find a livelihood; provide potable water; and improve health conditions. END SUMMARY

WATER MANAGEMENT PROBLEM IS POLITICAL, NOT TECHNICAL

2. (SBU) Established in 1993 and renewed in 1997, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) Executive Board consists of Central Asian deputy prime ministers who are in charge of agriculture, water, and environmental protection. The Heads of the IFAS State Council set overall policy and approves the financing of regional programs in the Aral Sea Basin. In addition, IFAS attracts financing from international donors for the Aral Sea Basin Program (ASBP) that is designed to alleviate the ecological situation in the districts around the Aral Sea and improve environmental management in five Central Asian countries. This includes the creation of a monitoring system for the interstate region and a scientific database; flora and fauna

protection; and trans-boundary resources management. IFAS includes its permanently standing Executive Committee in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and also its field branches in Kyzylorda, Kazakhstan, in Dashauz, Turkmenistan and in Nukus, Uzbekistan. In accordance with the Heads of State decision in 1993, the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) and the Interstate Commission for Sustainable Development (ICSD), were made subordinate to the IFAS. (See Reftel for further information on IFAS and the water situation in Uzbekistan.

13. (SBU) Tashkent IFAS office head Usman Buranov told the Regional Environmental Officer (REO) that the question of water management is no longer a technical question but rather a political one. The entire water management infrastructure was built during the era of the Soviet Union, but it began to disintegrate after the Soviet Union's collapse. For example, he cited an electrical power station in Ferghana Valley that is currently inoperable because the water levels in the surrounding basin are too low to generate sufficient hydro power. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have large uranium tailings that are posing severe threats to the existing water basins, and while some work has been done to prevent this, there is still much more that needs to be done. Buranov noted that in general the land quality is worsening. In Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan's autonomous region and the most downstream part of Uzbekistan, there is not enough water for local use.

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14. (SBU) Buranov noted that the question of proper water management in the region is inextricably linked to the question of energy, especially hydro-energy. He complained that international organizations (he was purposefully vague which organizations) were not very helpful. When working in Uzbekistan, they supported Uzbekistan's position that the main rivers and their tributaries should be treated as trans-boundary water resources. When in Kyrgyzstan, the IOs supported Kyrgyzstan's position that water is a national resource to be treated as a strategic commodity. Furthermore, many IOs duplicate each others' work in Central Asia and do not actually advance a meaningful solution. Buranov wants to see "an absolutely neutral" observer come to Central Asia from "an authoritative organization" in order to help resolve the regional water management issue. He noted that the EU has left behind a lot of material and equipment in Uzbekistan that now is simply not being utilized. He offered his organization's services to help the IOs with infrastructure assistance, customs processing, and implementation.

NUKUS AT THE END OF THE LINE

15. (SBU) IFAS's largest field office is in Nukus, the capital of Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic, an impoverished region and the most hard-hit because of the desiccation of the Aral Sea. (Note: Nukus is near the end of the downstream Amu-Darya. The only hotel in town turns its water on at 7 AM for one hour in order to conserve the scarce water supply. End note.) IFAS Nukus Branch Director Ubbiniyaz Ashirbekov told the REO that IFAS in Nukus has completed most of its initial 22 projects, and five more are currently in the planning stage involving small-scale grants from \$5,000-50,000. IFAS has five main areas of work in the region: restore the Amu-Darya River delta system; plant trees and shrubs in the Aral Sea dry

sea bed to reduce dust storms; give micro loans to help people find a livelihood; provide potable water; and improve health conditions.

RESTORE AMU-DARYA DELTA ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

16. (SBU) Ashirbekov said IFAS hopes to reverse the drying up of the Amu-Darya River Delta that feeds into the Aral Sea. In the past, the Amu-Darya delta had more than 100 fresh water lakes with more than 600,000 hectares of surface water. Much of this is now lost. IFAS was able to restore a couple of lakes, but the Mezhdurechinskoye Reservoir, designed to be a primary accumulator in the region of runoff water, was a failure, and it is now essentially empty after the dam and sluice gate collapsed shortly after construction. This project hoped to emulate Kazakhstan's successful dam project that has contributed to the restoration of the North Aral Sea. Ashirbekov still holds out hope that IFAS can find funding to restart this project. (Note: On the road from Nukus to Muynak, REO saw the Amu-Darya river levels were so low that the water appeared to be standing, with no flow at all. Near Muynak the mighty Amu-Darya was barely a streamlet that could easily be waded across or, in some cases, jumped across. REO saw a number of reservoirs that

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Ashirbekov mentioned. Some were empty fields that could catch runoff water, if there were any to catch. Others were more like isolated pools serving no purpose. REO did see a number of cows taking an afternoon drink in the otherwise arid and parched landscape. End note.)

17. (SBU) Ashirbekov estimated that five billion cubic meters of water per year would be needed just to support the lake system and ensure the water level was appropriate. Of this, 3.5 million are so-called "environmental flows" that must be released downstream in accord with regional agreements signed by the five Central Asian presidents in 1993 but never implemented. This water has to be released, no matter how much flow there is in the Amu-Darya River. The remaining 1.5 million cubic meters will come from drainage from the agricultural fields. Ashirbekov said this chain of lakes can also help reduce the dust and sand storms that come in from the north. It can also hold water surplus from the Amu-Darya and, once the sluice gate is built, can release the surplus water into the East Aral Sea as needed. He said IFAS has solved all the technical problems and all that remains is to find adequate financing. He estimated the cost of the water system project at \$60 million, of which IFAS has spent \$14 million thus far, most of it on the Mezhdurechinskoye Reservoir.

FORESTATION TO REDUCE SEA BED DUST STORMS

18. (SBU) Ashirbekov said the Aral Sea currently is unfit for any use. It is so heavily salinized now that there is a 20 kilometer wide edge of crystallized salt along much of the sea coast, with water saline levels that exceed 100 grams per liter. Because of the continual desiccation of the Aral Sea and its shrinkage, the amount of new dry land area (sea bed area) in Uzbekistan now is about three million hectares. Of this, about 250-300,000 hectares are suitable to plant salt-resistant and drought-resistant trees and bushes.

19. (SBU) IFAS has planted some saline-resistant,

drought-resistant brush and trees in the dry seabed and, according to Ashirbekov, that has helped reduce the amount of salt and dust blown into the air. This forestation has also helped prevent a further decrease in the underground water table, which has a significant impact on biodiversity as well as ecological consequences for further forestation and wildlife. IFAS looks to plant 10-11,000 hectares per year, with funding both from the government and from international organizations. However, he said, it will take 30 years to complete the forestation at this rate. To date, IFAS has forested about 7,000 hectares.

MICRO LOANS TO FIGHT POVERTY

¶10. (SBU) Ashirbekov said the agriculture sector accounts for up to 70 percent of Uzbekistan's GDP and provides livelihood to a significant portion of the population. Unfortunately, all the irrigation water in the Karakalpakstan region is highly salinized and the downstream river is heavily polluted. This has contributed to a threefold

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decrease in agricultural production in the course of the past 30 years, which is reflected in the low living standard of the people in Karakalpakstan. IFAS now works with commercial banks, giving them grant money that banks then use as collateral to extend micro loans to provide individuals with a livelihood. These loans can be for simple livestock and plant production, but many loans are also for livelihoods not linked to agriculture that enable local residents to find alternative job opportunities. He cited loans for a photography shop, a cable TV business, and small-scale industrial production workshops as examples. IFAS also provides legal and economic consultation to local residents on how to deal with banks, lawyers, and the government bureaucracy.

PROVIDE SANITARY POTABLE WATER TO PEOPLE

¶11. (SBU) Ashirbekov said IFAS, working with water utility companies and the Ministry of Water and Agriculture, has carried out a number of projects to help bring drinking water to towns and villages. In addition, IFAS provided automated chlorinating equipment to water utilities to ensure a standardized dosage (it is now done by hand, resulting in improper levels of chlorination) and supplied 34 hospitals with water decontamination equipment. (Note: On the plane to Nukus, we overheard a woman explaining that she once lived in Muynak near the Aral Sea for six months, and then her teeth started to fall out. She attributed this to the high salinity in the local water supply. End note.)

IMPROVE LOCAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

¶12. (SBU) Ashirbekov said the deteriorated environmental situation in Karakalpakstan adversely affects the health of the local population. There is a higher incidence of anemia as well as heart, kidney, liver, and prostate diseases. Orphans and children in poor households are the most vulnerable, he said, having virtually no protection at all. There are some medical centers that support those with disabilities and give food and clothing to the poor. South Korea has a special program that has helped these centers, and the South Korean Embassy

is actively engaged. IFAS also is looking for funding to provide assistance. (Comment: Ambassador met with the head of the Uzbek NGO ECO-SAN, which works to improve the health of residents of the Aral Sea region through projects to provide potable water and plant salt-tolerant vegetation to prevent the dispersion of salt from the former sea bed to adjacent agricultural land. Embassy and USAID will look at ways to assist the work of ECO-SAN. ECO-SAN enjoys high-level GOU support and could be an effective vehicle through which to provide assistance to a politically and geographically isolated part of Uzbekistan. End Comment.)

NORLAND